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Back to the Basics: the Urgent/Important Matrix

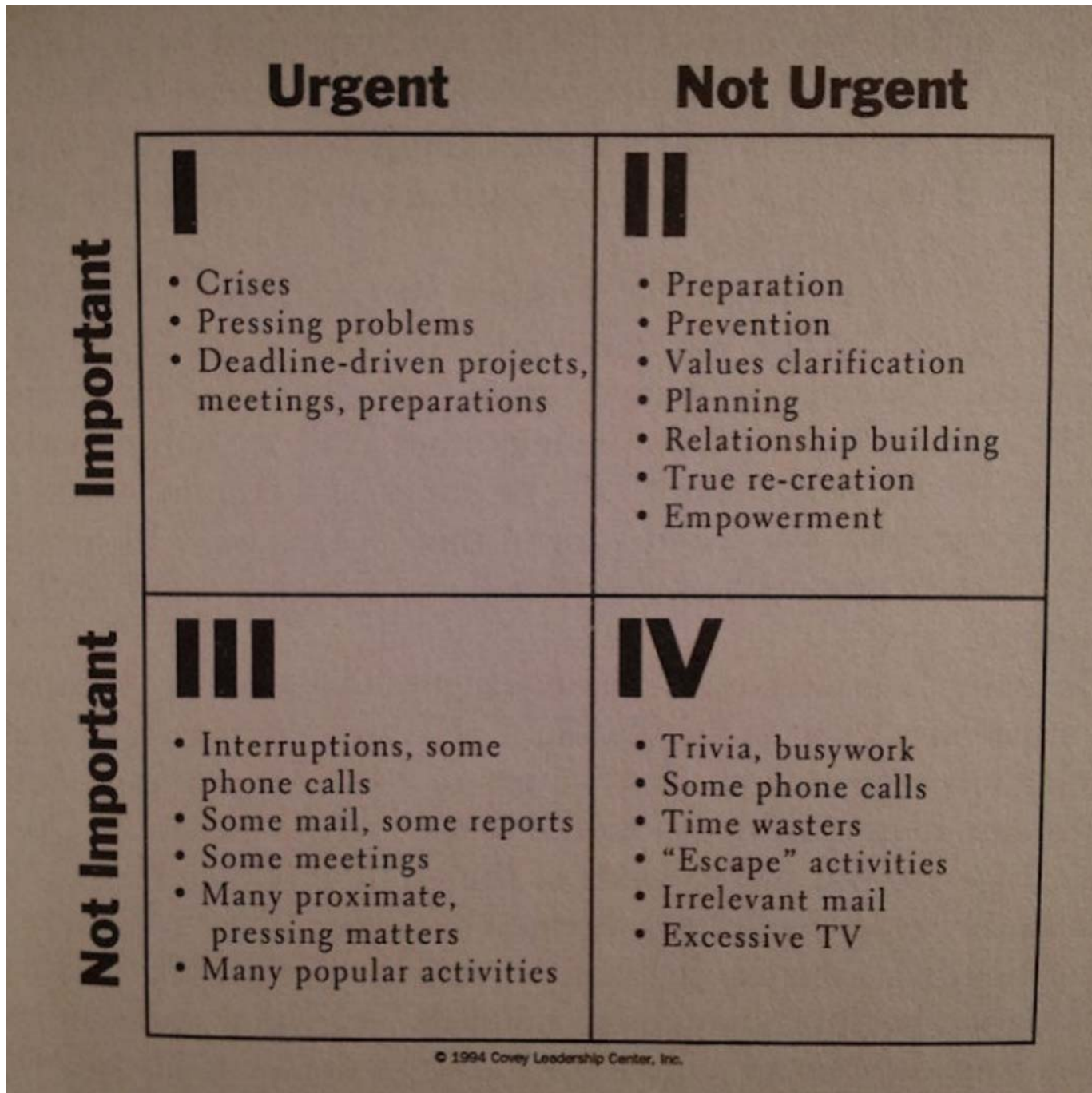


http://chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/files/2014/04/9574032385_ebe00fc376_b.jpg

(This post is the second in an occasional series revisiting classic productivity methods and tools. See the first post, [Back to \(GTD\) Basics: The Two-Minute Rule](http://chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/back-to-gtd-basics-the-two-minute-rule/56025)) (<http://chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/back-to-gtd-basics-the-two-minute-rule/56025>)

One of the productivity tools that Stephen R. Covey has made well known in books like [The 7 Habits](#)

of [Highly Effective People](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1451639619/ref=as_li_ss_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=1451639619&linkCode=as2&tag=natmhou-20) (http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1451639619/ref=as_li_ss_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=1451639619&linkCode=as2&tag=natmhou-20) and [First Things First](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0684802031/ref=as_li_ss_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=0684802031&linkCode=as2&tag=natmhou-20) (http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0684802031/ref=as_li_ss_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=0684802031&linkCode=as2&tag=natmhou-20) is a four-quadrant matrix that visualizes the four possible combinations of Urgency and Importance:



<http://chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/files/2014/04/coveymerrill.jpg>

(graph as presented on p37 of First Things First)

This simple matrix (sometimes credited to Dwight D Eisenhower) can be a very helpful tool for thinking about the different activities you are currently doing as well as those you'd like to be doing. Urgency requires little explanation — things that seem to demand an immediate response or action. Importance has to do with your longer-term goals and values.

As Covey and Merrill explain in First Things First (http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0684802031/ref=as_li_ss_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=0684802031&linkCode=as2&tag=natmhou-20), it's Quadrant II — those activities that are Important and Not Urgent — that will benefit you the most in moving forward towards your most important goals. But many of us get caught up in only working on the urgent, deadline-driven tasks in front of us — which means we only turn to the important things once they've become urgent.

This is the Quadrant of Quality . . . Increasing time spent in this quadrant increases our ability to do. Ignoring this quadrant feeds and enlarges Quadrant I, creating stress, burnout, and deeper crises for the person consumed by it. On the other hand, investing in this quadrant shrinks Quadrant I. Planning, preparation, and prevention keep many things from becoming urgent. Quadrant II does not act on us; we must act on it. (37-38)

It's easy to be fueled by urgency — particularly the demands of others noted in Quadrant III — and to let meeting those requests take over all your time. Repeatedly asking yourself about what's the most Important thing you could be doing this week can help you gain some clarity about how you want to spend your time.

You'll notice that recreation is listed in this version of the matrix (there are many others in print and online) here as a Quadrant II activity — whereas “pleasant activities” are in Quadrant IV. If you've ever found yourself mindlessly escaping into something (the web, TV, a game) but felt unsatisfied afterwards, it might be a Quadrant IV entertainment according to Covey and Merrill:

This is the Quadrant of Waste . . . we get so battle-scarred from being tossed around in Quadrants I and III that we often “escape” to Quadrant IV . . . recreation in the true sense of re-creation is a valuable Quadrant II activity. . . Quadrant IV is not survival, it's deterioration. It may have an initial cotton candy feel, but we quickly find there's nothing there. (38)

This matrix can be useful for analyzing how you're currently spending your personal or professional time, and for clarifying where you'd like to spend more of your time going forward.

What is an Important but Not Urgent (Quadrant II) activity you'd like to do more of in the month

ahead? Let us know in the comments!

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